On Translating Shiba Ryōtarō into English

Unlike any other people of whom I am aware, the Japanese have developed, especially in the postwar era, a virtually insatiable appetite for historical fiction. They are willing to buy and read, as well as watch television productions of, numerous tales from their history, told and retold, repeatedly. Based largely on personal impression over the years, it seems that the Sengoku (Warring States, late-fifteenth to late-sixteenth century) and bakumatsu periods (late Tokugawa years, 1850s and 1860s) are the most fecund time frames for begetting historical novels, perhaps because both were so pregnant with the seeds of the dramatic change to come. Whatever the reasons may be, a number of Japanese novelists have become rich men writing long lists of historical titles.

For comparison’s sake, it should be noted that the United States—I am eliding discussion here of other parts of the Anglophone world—has also produced several extremely well-published historical novelists who have prospered greatly. To name just two among many, James Michener (1907–97) and Herman Wouk (b. 1915) have had huge legions of readers. What, then, is the great difference between a Michener or a Wouk and a Shiba Ryōtarō 司馬遼太郎 (1923–96), the topic of this essay? One important difference may be that few serious readers ever confuse Michener with the real thing. They read and continue to read his mammoth novels in part because of the “history” in them, of course, but more for the great romances or compelling stories in which they happen to be wrapped. The same might equally be said of James Clavell’s (b. 1932) historical novel Shogun, a novel set almost entirely not in the era of the Tokugawa shoguns but at the end of the Warring States era, the late Sengoku period; this novel sent the American academy running to attack its historicity or to defend its pedagogical utility.¹ Herman Wouk’s two-volume historical novel of World War II, The Winds of War and War and Remembrance, is somewhat more pretentious as a work of “history.”² Fascinating reads that his two hefty volumes are, they may indeed convey a flavor of the times in Europe, the Pacific, and North America, but they contain none of the normal apparatus anyone would expect to find in a work of historical scholarship. In part, this

¹ See, for example. Smith 1980, on Clavell 1975.
² Wouk 1971 and Wouk 1978. His two novels about the founding of the state of Israel and its many crises are historical novels, but with few real personages, and hence they struck me, at least, less as disguised history. Wouk 1993 and Wouk 1994.
may be true because, like Shiba but unlike Clavell, Wouk inserts numerous historical personages with their real names into his tale (the Roosevelts, Stalin, Hitler, and the like).

By contrast, I think many people do read Shiba Ryōtarō to learn history, or to fill in the blanks where history is mum, and until his death he played the role of authority on history to the hilt. True, he was not a university professor of history, but he attended conferences as an expert on history (and/or literature). Observing him, I was reminded of the late E.G. Marshall (1910–98), the actor who portrayed the senior defense lawyer on a much-hailed television series of the 1960s, *The Defenders*, when he was asked to speak to a convention of the American Bar Association. He responded that, appearances notwithstanding, he was not a lawyer. When about twenty years ago, Alan Alda (b. 1936), the star of the then hit series *M*A*S*H*, a television program about a field hospital unit in Korea during the American war there, did speak to the graduating class of Columbia University’s Medical School, he hastened to remind them that as an actor the only things he had in common with doctors was a compelling need to make people feel better and to be well compensated for it.

In Shiba’s voluminous corpus of mostly multi-volume historical novels, one finds as well a number of non-fiction works about Japanese history and literature. Do we classify such works as history, or perhaps as historical popularizations? Is this history à la Stephen Ambrose (1936–2002), Doris Kearns Goodwin (b. 1943), or one of the many other popularizers who, although they may use footnotes sparingly, at least do not plagiarize overly much? It is difficult to say. Shiba and others like him in Japan, even in their fictional works, frequently do cite directly from old historical and literary texts. They may not give chapter and verse but they do provide author and title. And, as long as Michener’s and Wouk’s historical novels may be, they usually pale in comparison to the length of much of Shiba’s and others’ output of historical fiction in Japan. Like Charles Dickens (1812–70), Shiba was often paid by the word. His novels were frequently serialized in weekly or monthly popular journals over the course of a year or two and then reissued in book form. This may in part help explain the author’s “logorrhea,” but it only begs the question on the consumer side of the equation. Can one imagine an English-language equivalent, for example, of Yamaoka Sōhachi’s 『山岡荘八』 twenty-six-volume historical novel entitled *Tokugawa Ieyasu* 徳川家康, which was incidentally translated in full into Chinese?3

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3 Reprinted in thirteen volumes (Kōdansha, 1981–84). Translated into Chinese in fifty-two volumes by He Lili 何黎莉 and Ding Xiaoai 丁小艾 (Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsí, 1991). Yamaoka has also written numerous other fictionalized historical biographies.